

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

U. S. POST OFFICE (Crown American Corporation Building)

HABS No. PA-5390

Location: 131 Market St., southeast corner of Locust and Market streets, Johnstown, Cambria County, Pennsylvania.

Present Owner/
Occupant: Crown American Corporation.

Present Use: Office building.

Significance: This was the first building in Johnstown designed specifically to serve as a post office, by John Knox Taylor, supervising architect of the Treasury. A grand example of the Greek Revival commercial style, the design of the post office represents the optimism felt about Johnstown in the first decades of the twentieth century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1912-1914. The Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury signed the official proposal drawing for the structure on May 1, 1911. Construction began on April 26, 1912, and the building was occupied on January 16, 1914.
2. Architect: James Knox Taylor. Taylor was supervising architect of the U.S. Treasury between 1897 and 1912. Under his tenure, the office of the supervising architect was responsible for the construction and maintenance of all government buildings.
3. Original and subsequent owners: U.S. government, 1914 to 1968; Crown American Corporation, 1968 to present.
4. Original and subsequent occupants: After the post office left the building in 1938, the U.S. government used the Market Street building as office space for various agencies. The 1938 city directory lists the occupant as the Works Progress Administration; in 1943 the building was vacant. From 1951 to 1965 the Veterans Administration was the major tenant, with various agencies such as the Internal Revenue Service, Selective Service, Bureau of Mines, and U.S. Coast Guard Recruiters occupying space at different periods. The building was vacant from 1966 to 1968, when Crown Construction (later Crown American Corporation) moved in. When Crown Construction bought the building in 1968 for \$127,500, the terms of sale (deed No. 836-584) stipulated that the company spend not less than \$200,000 on improvements, and would never use the property as a public garage, parking lot, or manufacturing establishment.

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5. Builder, Contractor, Suppliers:

Superintendent: Charles Marsh, for U.S. Department of the Treasury
Contractor: W.H. Fissell, New York, New York
Landscape Designer: E.H. Bochman, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Decorative Sculptor: Ernest Bairstow, Washington, D.C.
Iron, Cast Iron, Copper, Bronze: John Pirkel Iron Works, Brooklyn, New York
Exterior Marble: Pennsylvania Marble and Granite Company, West Grove and Baker, Pennsylvania
Interior Marble: Vermont Marble Company, Proctor, Vermont
Granite: Stone Mountain Granite Corporation
Ornamental Plaster: Charles S. Alms, Greensburg, Pennsylvania
Architectural Terra Cotta: South Amboy Terra Cotta Company, South Amboy, New Jersey
Ornamental Iron: Flour City Ornamental Iron Works, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Office Safe: J.J. Baum Safe Company
Post Office Lock Boxes: Yale and Towne Manufacturing Company
Furniture: The Federal Equipment Company, Carlisle, Pennsylvania

6. Original plans and construction: The original proposal drawing (showing the Market Street elevation, the first-floor section, and basement, first floor, and mezzanine plans) by James Knox Taylor, the supervising architect of the U.S. Treasury, is dated May 1, 1911. The drawing is signed by the Secretary of the Treasury, the Postmaster General, and the Assistant Secretary of the Interior. The contractors, W. H. Fissell, were awarded the contract to construct the building for \$121,508. Except for a few minor alterations the building retains its original appearance.
7. Alterations and additions: Originally there were revolving doors on both Market and Locust street entries. These were removed in spring 1932 when one of them spun out of control, hitting an elderly gentleman, who fell to the floor, fractured his hip and subsequently died. (Correspondence to Supervising Architect, 1932.) After the post office moved out, the Locust Street entrance was blocked and the decorative metalwork in the portico in antis was replaced with reflective glass. The original plans detail the revolving doors.

B. Historical Context:

From 1897 to 1912 the office of the supervising architect was responsible for the construction and maintenance of all government buildings. Under the provisions of the 1893 Tarsney Act, these were designed within the Treasury Department or bid on by private architects and contracted out ("History of Post Office Construction"). Large government projects generally were designed by private architects, but by 1904 it was determined to be more cost effective to design smaller buildings in-house. Buoyed by the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 and the subsequent City Beautiful movement, in 1901 Supervising Architect James Knox Taylor announced a return to the "classic style of architecture" for government buildings. (Lois Craig, The Federal Presence, 232.) The

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Johnstown Post Office follows that mandate.

On December 13, 1905, House Resolution 7036 was passed, giving the Treasury Department the authority to build a post office in Johnstown. In December 1907 Johnstown postmaster L. J. Foust wrote to Taylor, indicating a desperate need for a new post office. He cited a jump in the number of post office employees from nineteen to fifty-eight between 1897 and 1906, concluding that the present building (on Franklin Street, below the Tribune offices) was simply too small. The supervising architect agreed, and in 1908 asked for proposals from local landholders interested in selling land to be used for the new building. The corner of Market and Locust streets, belonging to real estate salesman Alexander Adair, was chosen, and on December 23, 1908, U.S. Department of the Treasury site agent Fred Brackett reported on the general difficulties involved in building in Johnstown, and the specific problems with the chosen site:

It is difficult to find a site in Johnstown within the business district that will not be subject to a disastrous overflow of water, to avoid which entirely, the site must be selected on high ground entirely outside of the business district. If a site is selected within the business district, extraordinary measures must be taken to protect the basement of the Post Office building from damage by flood, and the common danger which menaces businessmen must be shared by the government. . . . [The proposed site on Market and Locust] is fairly well situated, the only apparent objections being the city "lockup" or jail in the rear of City Hall (an adjoining site), and its liability to overflow of water from spring freshets.

Project supervisor Charles Marsh wrote monthly progress reports to Taylor during the construction period. Taylor's authority was far-reaching; he even took it upon himself to approve samples of all materials used in the building. In spite of the great deal of time this required (several letters between Marsh and Taylor record Marsh's consternation with the slow process), the project proceeded without serious delay.

In addition to Marsh's progress reports, Taylor sent Treasury Department inspectors to the site. One of the most interesting (and least technical) observations came from inspector A. A. Packard on November 12, 1913:

The terra cotta ornament and crown mould do not quite harmonize with the [exterior] marble work, but will probably tone down soon, as a result of smoke and fumes prevalent in vicinity.

The building was occupied on January 17, 1914. The postmaster and supervising architect continued to correspond after 1914, mainly about administrative matters. On May 28, 1935 Postmaster Frank J. Studeny wrote to the Honorable Joseph Gray of the House of Representatives, complaining that the lobby of the post office was too small, the roof leaked, and the building was not set up to handle parcel post effectively. Gray, in turn, approached the postmaster general, and by September 3, 1935, bids were being accepted for a new post office site in Johnstown. Construction on the new building, at the corner of Franklin and Locust streets, began in late 1937, and by the next fall the post office moved to the new building. The old building on Market was then used as offices for government

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agencies.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The building is a textbook example of Greek Revival styling, with a Doric order portico and a flat entablature.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 91'-8" x 90'-8". The building is one story, with a basement and a mezzanine. The three-bay main facade on Market Street features an entrance portico created by eight columns.
2. Foundations: The brick basement walls are 8" thick.
3. Walls: Above grade the basement walls are faced with granite to the first floor; on the first floor and above, the superstructure is faced with Pennsylvania white marble. The Doric entablature has triglyphs and ornamental terra cotta metopes. Ashlar limestone medallions atop the four outer columns signify Justice, the seal of the United States, the seal of Pennsylvania, and the Pony Express. Originally a cast-iron facing covered with electroplated bronze stretched across the portico behind the columns.
4. Structural systems, framing: Reinforced concrete structure. The roof is wood-framed composition; the floor is reinforced concrete.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Originally there were wooden revolving doors on both the Market and Locust Street entrances. The Locust Street entrance has been closed off completely. Originally there were three revolving doors on Market Street (between the central four columns); they were removed in 1932. Now standard metal-encased glass swinging doors provide access to the building.
 - b. Windows and shutters: The original drawing includes two-story windows on the Market Street elevation, one on either side of the portico, but they were never installed. Originally the portico in antis was composed of glass covered by decorative metalwork; today, the metalwork has been removed and reflective glass installed. Originally all the exterior windows and doors were encased in electroplated cast iron.
6. Roof: The roof is flat, with ornamental terra cotta lion's-head dentils running

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across the terra cotta cornice.

C. Description of Interior:

1. The original floor plans are attached; the interior has been completely remodeled.
2. Flooring: Finished oak and pine.
3. Wall and ceiling finish: Available information reveals that ornamental terra cotta inserts in the main lobby pilasters were painted blue and cream.
4. Mechanical equipment: Available information indicates that the main part of the basement was devoted to a boiler.

D. Site: The building faces northwest on what has historically been a busy corner in the downtown commercial district.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural Drawings: The only extant drawings of the first Johnstown post office, dated May 1, 1911, and signed by James Knox Taylor, are housed at the Cartographic and Architectural Branch of the National Archives, part of Record Group 121.

B. Bibliography:

Craig, Lois. The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics, and Symbols in United States Government Buildings. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, n.d. [1977?]

General Correspondence and Related Records 1910-1939: Letters of the Supervising Architect. Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

[Harris, Emily J.] "History of Post Office Construction." U.S. Postal Service, Office of Real Estate, Washington, D.C. July 1982.

Policicchio, Benjamin. "The Architecture of Johnstown." Johnstown: The Story of A Unique Valley. Johnstown: Johnstown Flood Museum, 1985.

C. Supplemental Material:

Drawings of floor plans, Market Street elevation, and section, from the National Archives.

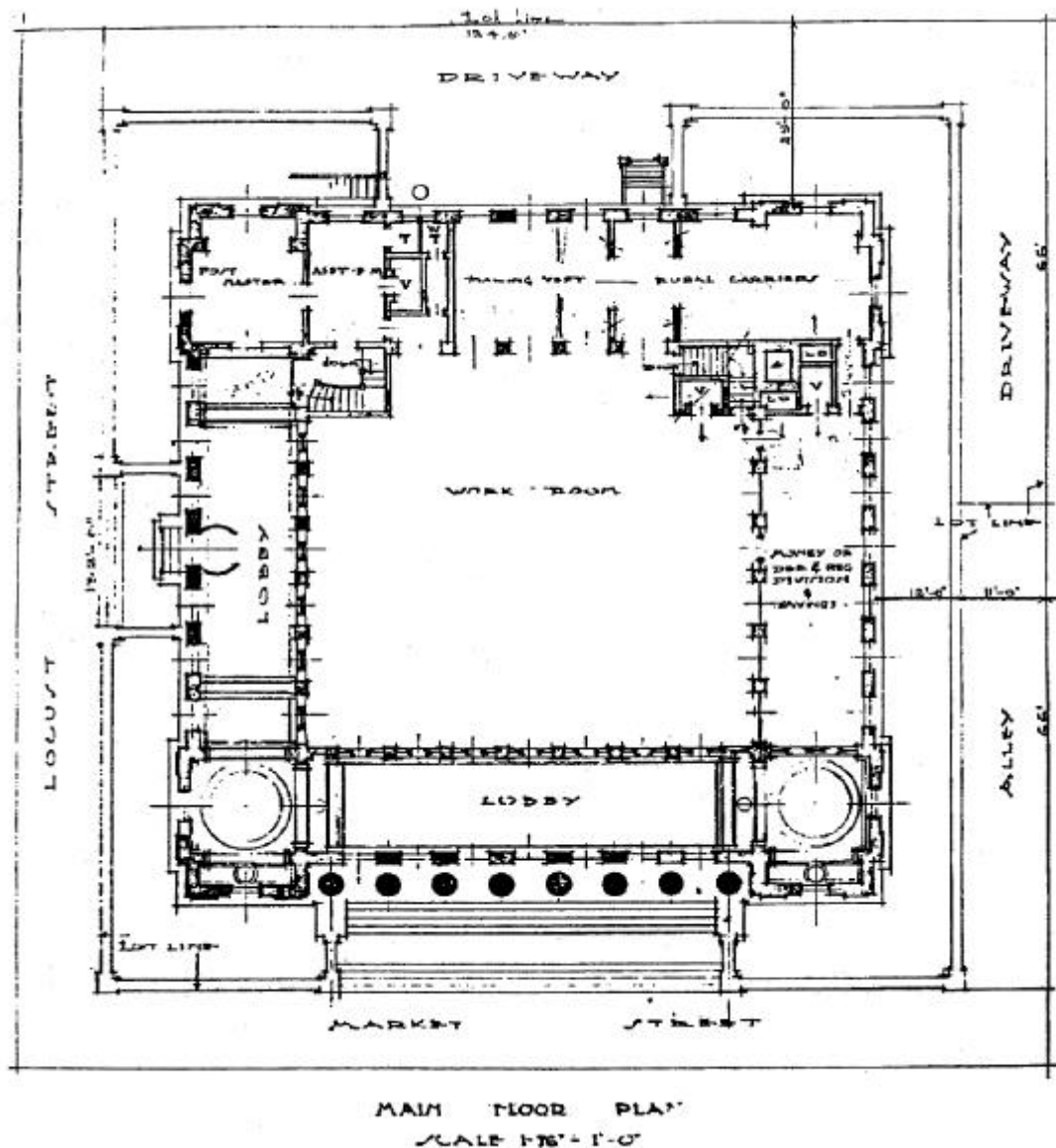
PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was prepared by HABS historian Terri L. Hartman as part of a larger project to document the city of Johnstown in the summer of 1988. The project was completed by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER),

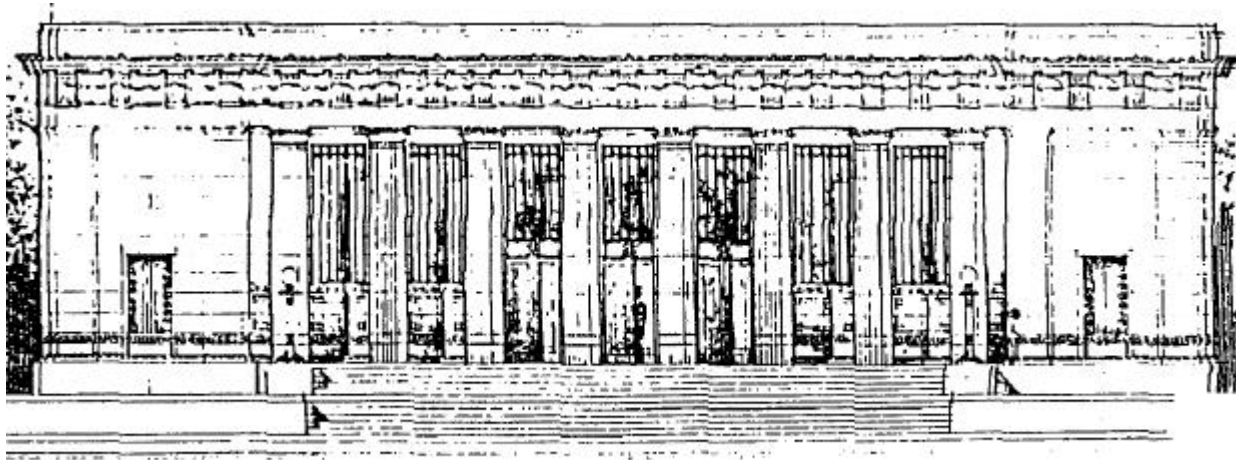
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Robert J. Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. Both AIHP and HABS/HAER are agencies of the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Alison K. Hoagland, HABS historian, was project manager and editor. Large-format photographs were contributed by HAER photographer Jet Lowe.

An overview of the history of the city is included in HABS No. PA-5669; see additional HABS reports on buildings in the downtown and other neighborhoods. These reports were incorporated in the publication edited by Kim E. Wallace, The Character of a Steel Mill City: Four Historic Neighborhoods of Johnstown, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service, 1989).

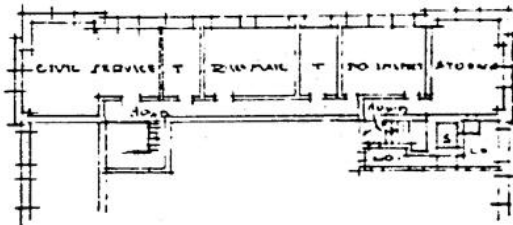


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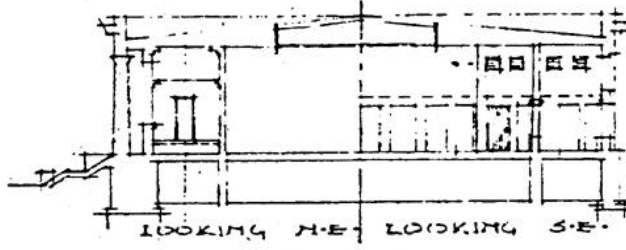


MARKET STREET ELEVATION

MEZZANINE

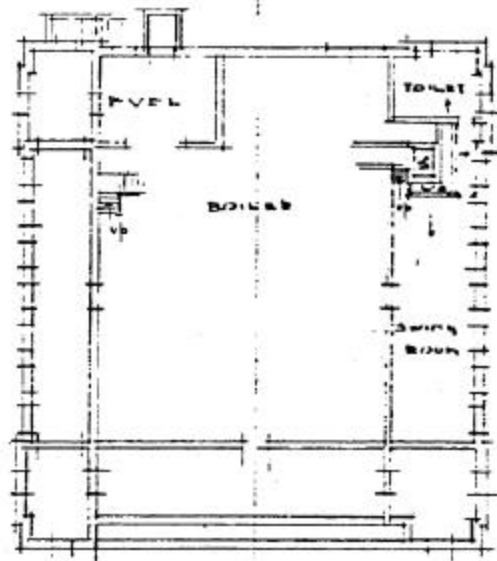


SECTION



1-32" = 1'-0"

BASEMENT



1-32" = 1'-0"